Social Change & The Great War

When war broke out in 1914 ‘universal social programs’ did not exist in the Dominion. In small fishing communities, people did their best to care for one another, sometimes through local mutual benefit societies such as the Society of United Fishermen and the Star of the Sea Society. These organizations provided basic voluntary insurance in the case of injury, illness, or death impacting members’ families. A combination of government aid, private charity, and church-based societies provided at least some arrangements for the provision of social services.

The Women’s Patriotic Association (WPA) and the Great War Veterans’ Association (GWVA) emerged as Dominion-wide, inter-denominational organizations. In addition to its core work, the WPA supported women who by virtue of the war were empowered with responsibility for their communities. After the war, the WPA turned its attention to the health, well-being, and protection of vulnerable children among the urban poor in the central district of St. John’s.

The GWVA was established to lobby for the needs of returning military personnel including pensions, employment opportunities and education. Emergency relief was provided to vulnerable veterans in the form of concrete care such as rent, heat, food, and transportation. The women who were members of the WPA supported the GWVA by organizing socials and selling Forget-Me-Not flowers for Memorial Day on July 1. In return, the GWVA passed a resolution in 1925 urging the government to award the franchise to women of the Dominion.